



Vaccines Work!



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Op/Ed – by Health Commissioner Harry Chen, MD

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The year is 2000 and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention declared that measles is eliminated in the U.S. This is a triumph of vaccination, one of the most important tools in the public health toolbox. No longer could America expect the hospitalizations or deaths that were previously the norm. The rest of the world has not been so fortunate. Worldwide, an estimated 20 million people get measles and 122,000 die from the disease each year.

Now fast forward to today. In the U.S., we are in the middle of a widespread measles outbreak that started in Disneyland, of all places. With more than 120 cases of measles reported from 16 states and Washington, DC, we are well on our way to exceeding last year's total of 644 cases in the U.S. – the greatest number since this highly infectious disease was declared eliminated. How do we find ourselves in this dangerous situation? The answer is clear, given that most of the current patients are unvaccinated. Yes, this outbreak is a result of parents choosing not to vaccinate their children.

There is no controversy. Giving vaccines, like the MMR vaccine that protects against measles, mumps and rubella, is the most important action parents can take to protect their children from illness or death. The purported link between vaccinations and autism was simply bad science done by a now completely discredited physician whose license has been revoked. In a comprehensive study of vaccine safety, the Institute of Medicine "... uncovered no evidence of major safety concerns associated with adherence to the childhood immunization schedule."

The Internet is rife with sites that scare parents with unscientific and anecdotal "evidence". It's understandable that this causes anxiety about immunization. The risks of adverse health effects from immunization are tiny, while the benefits are immense – for every family, and for all of us. In Vermont, we've created a website at www.oktoaskvt.org for parents and others to explore their concerns and find credible information about vaccines.

Given our society's value of individual rights, it is important to understand that with those rights come responsibilities. Vaccinating our children is part of the social contract. We all help to protect the community at large and especially the most vulnerable among us. We need to consider those too young or too sick to be vaccinated. This is precisely why every state in the union – including Vermont – has a law requiring vaccination for school entry. And it's no surprise that the vast majority of Americans and Vermonters protect their children and their community by vaccinating.

As Vermont's health commissioner, what keeps me up at night is the knowledge that, despite the fact that most people choose vaccination, there are children who are not protected against preventable diseases like measles. And there are schools with vaccination rates below 90 percent, low enough that one case of measles would quickly spread to become an outbreak. To see the rate in your child's school, go to the Health Department's website at www.healthvermont.gov, and choose Immunization - School Reporting. Whether Ebola or measles, the world is too small to believe that it can't happen here. There's no question – it's just a plane ride away.

What's my advice? Let's reinforce the social norm of vaccination with our family, neighbors and friends. If you did not vaccinate your child, take a look at what's going on around you and reconsider. The science clearly supports vaccination and my 35 years in medicine provides strong support for the science. As a physician, to have seen children die of meningitis before a vaccination virtually eliminated the disease was a terrible experience. There's still time to ensure that this doesn't happen with other diseases here in Vermont. Vaccines work – please vaccinate!

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